

THE AMERICAN VETERAN
EPISODE 8, SEGMENT 1

SEPTEMBER 2005

JIM BENSON

HURRICANE KATRINA. DEVASTATION IN THE GULF AND VA'S RESPONSE.
HELLO, I'M JIM BENSON.

THIS IS "THE AMERICAN VETERAN," A PUBLIC AFFAIRS PROGRAM PRODUCED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS. OUR PRIMARY FOCUS IN THIS EPISODE WILL BE ON HOW V-A RESPONDED TO HURRICANE KATRINA. BUT FIRST WE HAVE SOME IMPORTANT INFORMATION TO SHARE WITH YOU.

IF YOU ARE IN NEED OF ASSISTANCE AS A RESULT OF KATRINA, YOU CAN GO TO WWW.VA.GOV; FOR HELP WITH FINANCIAL BENEFITS YOU CAN ALSO CALL 1-800-827-1000; FOR HELP WITH HEALTH BENEFITS CALL 1-800-507-4571.

ALONE AMONG AREA HOSPITALS, THE VA MEDICAL CENTER IN NEW ORLEANS WAS ABLE TO EVACUATE ALL ITS PATIENTS – AND, EQUALLY IMPORTANT, TRANSFER MUCH OF THEIR MEDICAL INFORMATION. WE HAVE A SERIES OF REPORTS NOW, LOOKING AT THE EVACUATION ITSELF, AT SOME OF THE TECHNOLOGY THAT ENABLED OUR MEDICAL PERSONNEL TO CONTINUE TO PROVIDE CARE, AND AT HOW OUR EMPLOYEES ACROSS THE BOARD WENT INTO ACTION.

FIRST, THE EVACUATION. HERE'S DANIELLE MCDAVIT.

DANIELLE MCDAVIT

NEW ORLEANS NARROWLY ESCAPED KATRINA'S FULL WRATH UNTIL THE STORM SURGE OVERWHELMED THE CITY'S LEVY DEFENSES. THE BELOW-SEA-LEVEL CITY -- INCLUDING THE TEN-STORY V-A MEDICAL CENTER -- IN THE FLOODWATERS' PATH.

PHIL BOOGAERTS, ASSISTANT CHIEF ENGINEER:

IT'S ABOUT 3 AM ON TUESDAY, AUGUST 30TH, 2005, AND WE'RE OUT ON THE LOADING DOCK AND THE SCENE IS RIGHT OUT OF A SCIENCE FICTION MOVIE. THE HURRICANE WAS OVER 12 HOURS AGO, AND EVER SINCE THEN, INSTEAD OF THE WATER GOING DOWN, THE WATER'S COMING UP.

ANGEL GOURRIER CAIN, EMERGENCY ROOM TECHNICIAN:

WE NOTICED THE WATER WAS RISING. WE WERE LIKE, "SOMETHING'S GOING ON HERE, WE MADE IT THROUGH THE STORM, BUT WHY THE WATER RISING?" YOU COULDN'T GO ANYWHERE, WE WERE SURROUNDED BY WATER; IT WAS LIKE WE WAS ON AN ISLAND.

BOOGAERTS

IT'S FLOODING EVERYWHERE

MCDAVIT

220 MILES AWAY, IN ALEXANDRIA, LOUISIANA

BARBARA WATKINS, DIRECTOR, ALEXANDRIA, LA, VAMC

SO I GOT A CALL THAT 200-PLUS EMPLOYEES AND FAMILIES AND SOME PETS WERE TRAPPED IN THE HOSPITAL AND A TOTAL OF ABOUT 700 PEOPLE WERE IN THE HOSPITAL.

MCDAVIT

THEY NEEDED TO BE RESCUED. V-A EMPLOYEES IN ALEXANDRIA HELD FORT AT THEIR "COMMAND CENTER." A NATIONAL GUARD CONVOY HEADED THE S-O-S AND HEADED TO THE FLOODED CITY.

WATKINS

WE LOADED THEM UP WITH FOOD AND WATER, BECAUSE WE HAD BEEN TOLD THAT THE PEOPLE IN THE HOSPITAL WERE OUT OF WATER AND WERE OUT OF ALL FOOD, OTHER THAN A FEW THINGS.

MCDAVIT

KATRINA, LIKE A RAZOR-EDGED SWORD, CUTTING THE LINES OF COMMUNICATION.

WATKINS

IT'S AFFECTED EVERYBODY, ALL THE RESCUE MISSIONS, AND EVERYTHING. YOU SEND PEOPLE OFF AND YOU AREN'T SURE WHEN YOU ARE GOING TO HEAR FROM THEM AGAIN

MCDAVIT

BUT THE CRITICAL MISSION MOVED ALONG, WITH V-A WORKING HARD TO COORDINATE EVERY STEP TOWARD SAVING THE LIVES OF VETERANS, EMPLOYEES, AND THEIR FAMILIES TRAPPED INSIDE THE HOSPITAL.

BOOGAERTS

WE SHUT DOWN THE BOILER PLANT. THE WATER'S ON THE FLOOR, SO IT'S NO LONGER RUNNING.

CAIN

THE LIGHTS WENT OUT; THE GENERATORS KICKED ON.

LARRY TOWNSEND, , PATIENT

WE HAD EMERGENCY LIGHTS AND A COUPLE OF EMERGENCY PLUGS THAT THEY SAID WERE WORKING -- AND THEY'D BRING A FAN, AND A JUST A

REGULAR OLD HAND FAN AND MOVE IT BETWEEN ONE PATIENT TO THE OTHER TO COOL US OFF A LITTLE.

MCDAVIT

PATIENTS AND THEIR CARETAKERS, LIVE TO TELL THEIR STORY -- A TALE OF LIFE IN A GHOST CITY, WITH NO RUNNING WATER, NO WORKING TOILETS.

CAIN

WE TOOK GOOD CARE OF THEM. AND PLUS, WE HAD TO TAKE CARE OF OURSELVES. YOU KNOW, A COUPLE OF US HAD TO GET I-V'S.

MCDAVIT

EVACUATING ALMOST 700 PEOPLE FROM THE HOSPITAL – AN ARDUOUS PROCESS THAT TOOK DEDICATION, TEAMWORK, AND SEVERAL DAYS.

TOWNSEND

THEY FINALLY CAME UP, PUT US ON THE STRETCHERS, TIED US DOWN ON THEM, AND THEN HAND-CARRIED US DOWN SEVEN FLIGHTS DOWN TO THE EMERGENCY ROOM AND LOADED US ONTO AN ARMED TRUCK AND THEY BROUGHT US TO THE AIRPORT AND PUT US ON THE (C) 130S AND BROUGHT US UP HERE TO ALEXANDRIA.

MCDAVIT

HUNDREDS OF PATIENTS, EMPLOYEES, AND FAMILY MEMBERS, FLOWN TO OTHER V-A MEDICAL CENTERS ACROSS THE SOUTH – INCLUDING RURAL ALEXANDRIA.

WATKINS

ALL OF A SUDDEN WITHIN 24 HOURS WE WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR ABOUT ALMOST 400 PEOPLE, 69 PATIENTS AND ABOUT 320 SOME FAMILIES AND VA EMPLOYEES.

MCDAVIT

AT THE HOUSTON V-A, A MASSIVE TRIAGE EFFORT, PLANELOAD AFTER PLANELOAD.

ED TUCKER, DIRECTOR, HOUSTON VAMC AFFAIRS

THERE WAS A LOT OF JOY WHEN WE GOT THAT FIRST PLANE, BECAUSE WE KNEW A THAT WE WERE NOW STARTING TO BRING RELIEF.

HENRY FAGGEN, PATIENT

THIS IS A PLACE OF MERCY.

MCDAVIT

HENRY FAGGEN, JUNIOR, RESTING AFTER BEING EVACUATED FROM THE NEW ORLEANS V-A. FAGGEN, MISSING SEVERAL FAMILY MEMBERS AND FEARING HIS HOME, DESTROYED IS GRATEFUL.

FAGGEN

THERE ARE A LOT OF PEOPLE STILL AT HOME, OUT ON THE STREET, IN ROOFTOPS, IN ATTICS, DON'T HAVE ANYWHERE TO GO, SO IT'S A GOOD TIME TO BE A VETERAN.

MCDAVIT

VETERANS, EMPLOYEES AND FAMILIES, SAFE, BUT THE NEW ORLEANS MEDICAL CENTER STILL NEEDED PROTECTION, AND A MAJOR CLEANUP.

KEITH FROST, LEAD SECURITY SPECIALIST, VA

WE'VE BROUGHT 34 POLICE OFFICERS IN FROM ACROSS THE COUNTRY VA POLICE OFFICERS, TO SECURE AND STABILIZE THE FACILITY.

MCDAVIT

UNTIL THE "CRESCENT CITY" -- AND THIS MAJOR HOSPITAL -- ARE BACK OPEN FOR BUSINESS -- NEW ORLEANS EMPLOYEES ARE WELCOMED AT OTHER V-A FACILITIES. THIS AUDITORIUM ON THE MEDICAL CENTER CAMPUS BECAME A TEMPORARY HOME, GIVING DISPLACED EMPLOYEES AND THEIR FAMILY MEMBERS A PLACE TO SLEEP. AND PATIENTS ARE ALSO GETTING THE CARE THEY NEED, WHEREVER THEY ARE, FROM BATON ROUGE TO BILOXI TO HOUSTON.

MEDICAL RECORDS RESCUED

JONATHAN PERLIN, MD, VA UNDER SECRETARY FOR HEALTH

EVERY PATIENT WHO CAME FROM NEW ORLEANS HAS AN ELECTRONIC HEALTH RECORD THAT'S HERE AT HOUSTON. WE'RE AT THE HOUSTON MICHAEL DEBAKEY MEDICAL CENTER RIGHT NOW AND THIS MEDICAL CENTER IS HOSTING ALL OF THE NEW ORLEANS PATIENT RECORDS SO THE PATIENTS' RECORDS ARE AVAILABLE WHETHER THAT PATIENT IS HERE IN HOUSTON OR WHETHER THAT PATIENT RECEIVES CARE ANYWHERE IN THE SYSTEM.

LARRY GARDNER, CHIEF COMPUTER OPERATIONS

MONDAY WE STARTED THE PLANNING PROCESS OF "WHAT IF." WHAT IF A WORST CASE SCENARIO HAPPENED WHERE WE NEEDED TO RECOVER THE DATA BASE FROM ONE OF OUR SISTER SITES, SPECIFICALLY BILOXI OR NEW ORLEANS.

FRANK VAZQUEZ, CHIEF INFORMATION OFFICER

WHEN IT BECAME APPARENT THAT THERE WAS A REAL POSSIBILITY OF THE NEW ORLEANS HOSPITAL BECOMING FLOODED, I CALLED AND OFFERED HOUSTON AS A SITE, THAT GIVEN THE BACKUP TAPES FOR THE VISTA DATA

BASE, WE WOULD BE ABLE TO FULLY RESTORE THE NEW ORLEANS VISTA DATA BASE HERE AND MAKE THAT DATA AVAILBALBE TO ANY OTHER SITES WHO WOULD NEED THAT INFORMATION TO TREAT PATIENTS AS THEY ARRIVE AT OTHER FACILITIES THROUGH OUT THE VISN AND THROUGHOUT THE NATION.

GARDNER

WE WERE READY TO RESTORE THE TAPES THE MINUTE THE TAPES GOT HERE.

WATKINS

WE COULD'NT HAVE DONE ANY OF THIS WITHOUT ELECTRONIC MEDICAL RECORDS. BECAUSE TO FILL THE PRESCRIPTIONS WE NEED TO KNOW WHAT THE MEDICATION HISTORY WAS ON PATIENTS.

BARBARA SAPP DAVIS, RN, MICHAEL E. DEBAKEY VAMC

TO BE ABLE TO TRACK THAT PATIENT FROM THE DAY THEY ENTER INTO THE PRIME CARE CLINIC AND GET THAT DOCUMENTATION AND KNOW WHAT MEDS HE'S ON, KNOW WHAT MEDS THAT HAVE BEEN DISCONTINUED, GET THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF THAT PATIENT, KNOW THE NEXT OF KIN AND THAT SORT OF THING, IT IS INVALUABLE.

WATKINS

OUR PHYSICIANS CAN PULL UP THE RECORD, THEY HAVE THE RECORD AND THEY CAN PUT THINGS INTO THE RECORD AND READ WHAT'S THERE. SO I DON'T KNOW WHAT WE WOULD HAVE DONE WITHOUT IT.

MICHELE FOWLER, RN, ALEXANDRIA, LA, VAMC

I CAME FROM A FACILITY WHERE WE DID PAPER/ PENCIL RECORD KEEPING AND HERE EVERYTHING IS ON THE COMPUTER, SO IT'S VERY ACCESSABLE TO GO THROUGH AND LOOK UP ANYTHING ON THE PATIENT AS FAR AS THEIR RECORDS AND IT'S ALL RIGHT THERE. SO, IT'S BEEN A GREAT HELP TO NOT HAVE TO FOOL WITH PAPER.

PERLIN

ELECTRONIC HEALTH RECORDS MAKES IT EASY FOR US TO REFILL THEIR PRESCRIPTIONS AND FOR FOLKS WHO'VE LOST THEIR HOMES, WE'VE GOT A LOT OF PRESCRIPTION REFILLING TO DO.

KEN HARPER, CHIEF OF PHARMACY

THE ROBOT FILLS OUR FAST MOVING DRUGS. IT'S REALLY BUILT FOR A FACILITY OUR SIZE TO HANDLE ABOUT THOUSAND (OR) TWELVE HUNDER PRESCRIPTIONS IN AN EIGHT HOUR PERIOD AND IT'S GETTING PUSHED A LOT THESE DAYS.

GARDNER

I THINK WE ARE REALLY MOVING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION. THIS IS NOT AN EASY TASK. IT'S GOING TO TAKE A LOT OF PLANNING AND IT IS A CONTINUALL EVOLVING PROCESS. I DON'T THINK IT WILL EVER STOP EVOLVING AS NEEDS CHANGE. THE NICE THING ABOUT IT IS THAT WE'VE BEEN HIGHLY ADAPTABLE OVER THE YEARS. I DON'T THINK THAT ANOTHER MEDICAL CENTER OR LARGE HEALTH CARE ORGANIZATION COULD HAVE PULLED OFF WHAT WE DID IN MONTHS. MUCH LESS DAYS.

DAVIS

I THINK THAT IS A CREDIT TO THE VAMC BECAUSE WE ARE THE ONLY HOSPITAL IN THIS AREA AND THAT INCLUDES ALL THE OTHER PRIVATE AND STATE INSTITUTIONS THAT IS ELECTRONICALLY BEYOND THE TWENTY SECOND CENTURY.

- END -